



**PRATHAM
BOOKS**

A Book in Every Child's Hand

Monkey Business on Stage - Kallu's World 2

Author: Subhadra Sen Gupta

Illustrator: Tapas Guha

Level 4

Khajuria village was suffering from Ramlila fever. It was nothing new, as Kallu said, they got it every year. The fever usually started a month before Dussehra. As the low, dark grey monsoon clouds drifted away and the sky turned a glittering blue, there were festivities in the air and everyone began talking about Masterji and the Ramlila.

Everywhere in the village, at Dharampal's chai shop, in the vegetable fields, at the grocery store, in Moti Dadi's courtyard and at the tube-well, there was a single question being asked.

"What is Masterji planning to do this year?"

Kallu often said admiringly, "Masterji is the producer, director, scriptwriter and music composer of Ramlila and only he knows what we will see this year."



Masterji was the head of the village school and the Khajuria Ramlila Party that put up a fantastic show every year. Of course, they couldn't do the whole Ramayana because that was a very long story, and Khajuria did not have enough actors. So Masterji had written the dialogues of some of the most important scenes, and he would pick a few of them to enact for a week before Dussehra. So Khajuria never knew which scenes they would see.

A tent was put up in a corner of the field where Badri, the milkman kept his buffaloes. A stage was built with a bunch of wobbly folding tables they got from Jai Bhagwan's Tent House. The audience sat on the ground on durries and nowadays, as the village had electricity, they had both gas lamps and electric bulbs to light up the stage.

From the first day, Kallu and his gang were hanging around the school building where rehearsals were held, hoping Masterji would give them something to do. In the gang were Kallu, his sister Munia, brother Shabbo and his best friend Damu and his sister Saru. Day after day, they sat and watched the rehearsals, and by the end they knew most of the dialogues by heart.

Every year, Masterji would select scenes like the Sita swayamvar with Ram breaking the giant bow; then Kaikeyi and Manthara scheming to send Ram into exile and Dasaratha weeping and dying. Munia's favourite scene was of Laxman cutting off Surpanakha's nose and Ravan kidnapping Sita. Then there was Hanuman setting fire to Lanka, and finally the fantastic battle scenes with Ravan, Kumbhakarna and Meghnad fighting Ram, Laxman, Hanuman and their monkey army.



This year, their begging had paid off and Masterji had let Kallu, Damu and Shabbo play monkeys in the vanar sena. They were acting in the final battle scene and had to wear shorts, have monkey face make-up and long tails. It was amazing fun as they jumped about waving tin maces and swords. It made the girls, Munia and Saru very envious.

“It’s sooo silly!” Saru said grimly as they headed for the school one morning. “Why can’t girls act in the Ramlila?”

“Did you see ‘Sita’ last night?” Munia asked. “That boy studies in Kallu Bhaiya’s class and he’s starting to get a moustache...”

“And his voice kept cracking,” Saru giggled. “I really think Billo Chachi would be just perfect as Sita.”

“Yes she would! Now if her husband Dharam Chacha can play Ram, why can’t she be Sita?”

“She even asked Masterji, but he said that the Khajuria panchayat would stop the Ramlila if he took real women. *Dhat!*” Saru shook her head in disgust.

“Anyway, tonight’s Badri Bhaiya’s big scene!” Munia gave a small skip of happiness. “I can’t wait!”

For Kallu and his gang, the best actor in the show was Badri, the mad buffalo man who always played Hanuman. He was short and stocky, had a head of unruly hair, a bushy moustache, big round eyes and a booming voice. So when he was on stage, strutting about yelling out his lines, even Ram and Laxman faded into the background.

According to Kallu and his gang, the scene where Hanuman exchanges insults with Ravan and then sets Lanka on fire was an absolute super-hit scene. Masterji had written such fantastic dialogues for Ravan and Hanuman that the audience was totally hypnotized and listened to every word in breathless silence.

That evening, the gang was among the earliest to arrive at the tent. Badri's buffaloes were tied nearby and according to Damu, they had to do 'high jumps' over the pats of buffalo dung.

"Second row from the front, middle of the row. Perfect!" said Shabbo, settling down on the durrie with a happy sigh.

“Well, tomorrow we won’t need the seats,” said Kallu, giving Munia and Saru a sneaky grin. “We boys will be on stage.”

“Hah!” Munia shook her curly head. “All you do is jump around like idiots, and none of you have a single line to say.”

“And Shabbo will be killed by Meghnad and just lie there flat on his back, like a log of wood,” added Saru with a giggle.

“Do you know it takes real acting to play dead?” Shabbo asked hotly. “I have to breathe very, very slowly and keep my eyes shut tight!”

“You’ll get the award for the best dead monkey in Khajuria!” Damu grinned. As the sun set, the tent began to fill up.

Backstage was a hive of activity, with everyone putting on their costumes and slapping on make-up. Dharampal was free tonight, as Ram did not appear in the scene, so he was busy doing the Hanuman make-up on Badri's face.

"I wish you would shave off your moustache Badri," he said. "It looks really odd. Hanuman on TV and films is always clean-shaven."

"Colour it brown and no one will know," growled Badri.

"I am NOT shaving it! FORGET IT!!" Then he held the sheets of dialogue before his face, squinted and grumbled, "Why does Masterji keep changing the dialogues every year?"

“He’s an artist and all artists are crazy anyway. This year in the *Bharat milap* scene, he wanted Ram and Bharat to sing a song,” said Dharampal.

“A song?” repeated Badri.

“Yes. It went - *bhai bhai ka pyar amar rahe...* something... something...” Dharampal laughed.

“But you can’t sing!” said Badri.

“Exactly! And neither can Lattu, who’s playing Bharat! He tried for two days to make us sing and then gave up. Thank God!” said Dharampal.

Suddenly, Badri sat up and yelled at the top of his voice, making Dharampal jump, “Masterji! Masterji!” “*Kya hua?*” Masterji came running in a panic.

“You wrote a song for Ram but not for Hanuman? And I can sing!” said Badri.

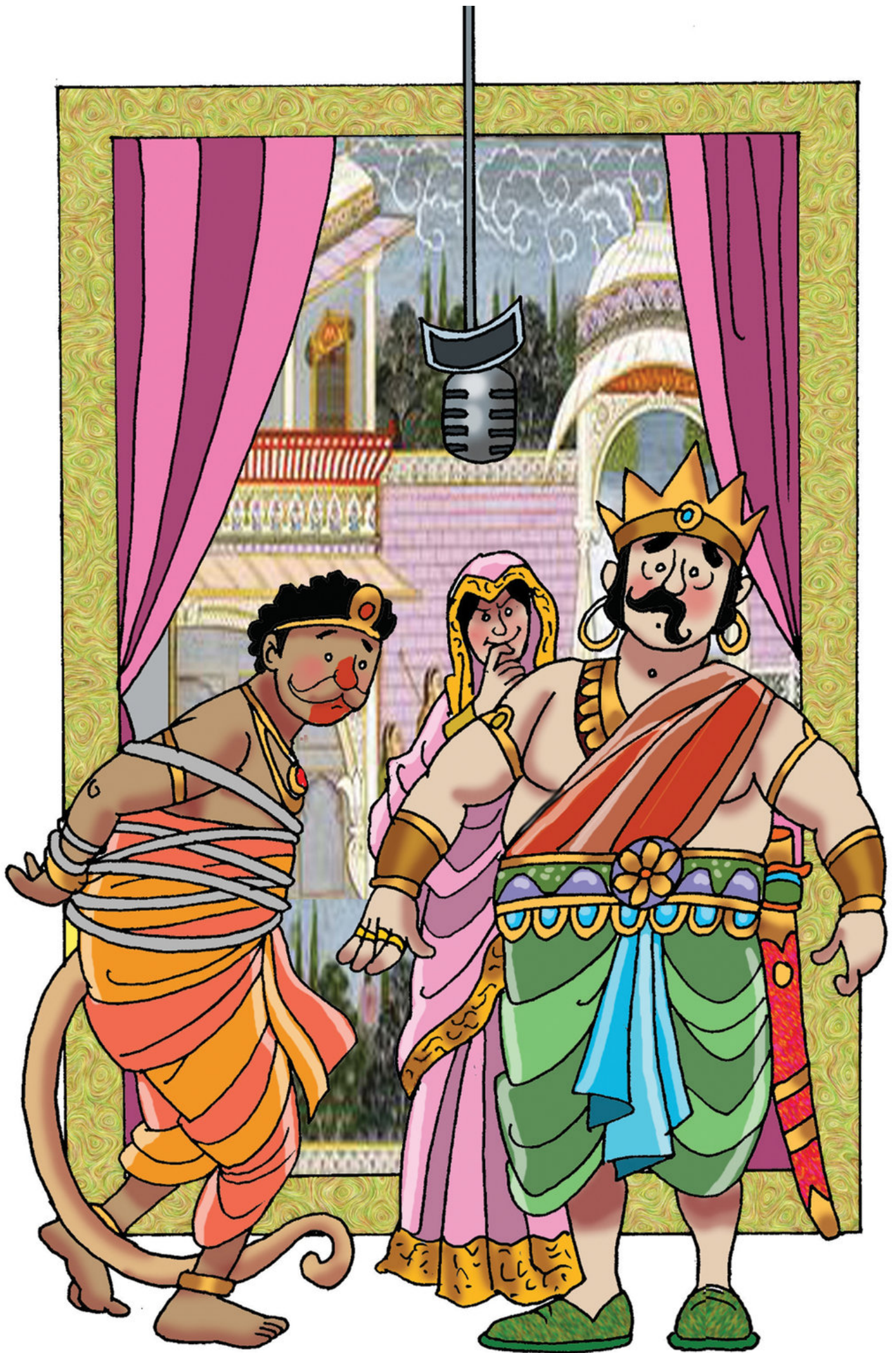
“Arrey Badri!” Masterji stuffed a paan into his mouth, “Hanuman does not sing.”

“And what will you sing anyway?” asked Dharampal carefully painting Badri’s nose a bright red.

“Hanuman-Ravan ki dushmani amar rahe?”

“Heh... heh... ho... ho...” Masterji walked away laughing, spraying paan juice in the air.

As Dharampal began to attach the tail to Badri’s bright yellow shorts, nobody noticed the thoughtful look on Badri-Hanuman’s brown face...



An hour later, the curtains were dragged away to reveal Ravan's royal durbar in Lanka, and it looked really gorgeous with carpets, curtains and thrones, all supplied by Jai Bhagwan's tent house. Jai Bhagwan was playing Kumbhakarna because he was the fattest man in the village.

The scene was going beautifully and the audience was absorbed in the action. Ravan was being played by Chhotey Lal, the village wrestler and Mandodari by Narain, who was in class ten, wearing a pink and gold sari.

Ravan looked really threatening with his rippling muscles, bushy eyebrows, curling moustache and big eyes. The only problem was that Chhotey wasn't very good at remembering the dialogues.

“Masterji really struggled to make Chhotey remember his lines,” Damu whispered. “He mixes up everything.”

“And then Masterji solved the problem!” Kallu grinned.

The others turned to look at him, “How?”

“Watch Narain’s lips, he’s prompting Chhotey.

Masterji made him learn the lines of both Mandodari and Ravan!” whispered Kallu.

“Sooo clever!” breathed Munia in admiration.

“Here he comes!” said Saru with an excited wriggle as Hanuman was dragged on to the stage by the *rakshasas*. They leaned forward, eyes glued to Hanuman, who was all tied up in thick ropes but stood defiantly tall, glaring angrily at Ravan.

“Who is this?” Mandodari whispered to Chhotey, prompting away.

“Umm...” Ravan bent his head towards her, listened and then said loudly, “Who is this?”

A *rakshasa* stepped forward, “We caught him in the Ashokavan, Maharaj! He was talking to Devi Sita.”

“What...” prompted Mandodari.

“WHAT!” shouted Ravan springing up, suddenly remembering the rest of his lines, “How did he get inside? What was he doing there?” and he waved his arms in rage.

Munia gave a soft giggle, and then as other people spotted Ravan’s face, the rest of the audience also began to laugh. As he was waving his arms, Ravan had dislodged one end of his false moustache, and now it was dangling over his lips like a black earthworm.

From where he sat, Kallu could see Masterji in the wings frantically waving his arms and pointing to Ravan's face. About to start his lines, Hanuman turned to look at the audience in surprise. This was a serious scene. What was making them laugh?

"Kya hua?" he asked, peering into the dark. "Why are you laughing?"

"Ravan's moustache is falling off, Badri Bhaiya!" someone kindly informed him from the back.

"Oh ho! Sorry!" Ravan jumped nervously and quickly fixed the moustache back in place, and then turned a sweaty face towards Mandodari, "What do I say next?" In his panic he forgot to whisper, and everyone began to laugh again.

In the wings, Masterji was chewing his paan faster and faster...

“Tell me who you are... you thieving monkey!”
Mandodari prompted.

“What?” Ravan was still a bit flustered. “*Theek!* Tell me who you are... you thieving monkey!” And he finally turned to address Hanuman, “Where have you come from?”

“Here it comes!” Shabbo leaned forward eagerly, “My favourite dialogue.”

Masterji had written some of the important dialogues in rhyme, and the bit where Hanuman introduces himself to Ravan was the best poetry Shabbo had ever heard. And Badri’s acting was always quite superb!

He would stand tall, thump his chest and ask angrily, “Thieving monkey? Who are you to call me that? Do you know who I am?” and then turning to face the audience, he would launch into the poem that Shabbo knew by heart...

*Main hoon Ramji ka chela
Main hoon Hanuman albela
Tu hai Ravan balwaan
Kar du tujhko pareshan*

Then he would pause dramatically, thump his chest again and say in ringing tones...

Main hoon pavan putra Hanumaaan!

As they waited breathlessly, Hanuman glared at Ravan and shouted, “Do you know who I am?” He turned to face the audience, cleared his throat and suddenly Badri began to sing!

Main hooooon Ramjiii kaaa chelaaa...

“He’s SINGING?” Saru’s eyes were wide with shock.

Main hoon... Hanumaaan... albelaaa... Hanuman sang on...

“He’s good!” Kallu was laughing in delight. “Badri Bhaiya can really sing.”

In the wings, Masterji was standing absolutely still, as if struck by lightning. He was staring at his star actor as Badri sang away, and in shock he had forgotten to chew his paan.

Badri sang, eyes raised to the roof and one arm raised like a filmi hero. His tune had a nice rhythm, and the audience began to clap, and even Narain forgot he was on stage and joined in.



One *rakshasa* was swaying his hips in a really funny dance. Badri began to smile, and with a happy shake of his head, he decided to sing the whole song once again!

As he got to the last line, he waved to the crowd to join in and then sang out, *Main hoon pavan putra...* And the audience joined in a loud shout, *Hanumaaaaan!*

From the field outside, Badri's loyal buffaloes joined in the chorus, "Mooo! Mooooooooo!"

As they headed for home tiredly, Kallu declared with a huge, happy sigh, "What a super-hit Ramlila!"

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Monkey Business on Stage - Kallu's World 2 (English)

Welcome to Khajuria - a village where young Kallu and his gang run delightful adventurous riots almost everyday. It's Dussehra time and Masterji's yearly stage show of Ramlila is ready to go. What's the new twist in Masterji's Ramayan this time? Read on.

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